

A lifelong environmental journey

MY LOVE OF NATURE LED TO THE NEW ENGLAND WOODS, THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST AND A UCONN CLASSROOM

By Syma Ebbin



Top: Syma Ebbin's favorite local hiking spot is the Barn Island Wildlife Management Area in Stonington. Photo: Judy Benson

Center: Ebbin, left, meets with members of the UConn EcoHusky Club at Avery Point that she advises. Photo: Judy Benson



Even as a child, I had the need to be outside, in nature. I grew up in New York City, surrounded by the impervious surfaces and imposing structures of that urban environment. But I spent my summers on the edge of Long Island Sound at my grandfather's house, exploring the wet and permeable surfaces of the surrounding inlets and marshes.

At Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, my friend Nancy introduced me to backpacking. We hiked Vermont's Long Trail and parts of the Appalachian Trail every chance we got.

Those opportunities propelled me to Williams College in northwestern Massachusetts. There, the forest — specifically the college's old-growth Beinecke Stand — was of paramount importance to me and my research on spring ephemerals, the early-blooming wildflowers that thrive in New England forests. But the joys of walking and cross-country skiing in those woods were undermined by an existential angst that set in while taking Environmental Studies with lawyer and Williams Professor Tom Jorling.

After a semester of learning about the impacts of water and air pollution, population growth and the destruction of critical habitats and endangered species, a soul-killing malaise took hold. I discussed my depression with my roommate whose recommendation was simply, "don't think about it."

For me, this wasn't a viable option; I was ready to get my tubes tied. I didn't see a clear path to creating a bright and healthy future for planet Earth. But Professor Jorling didn't get depressed or at least he didn't let on. Instead he worked down in Washington, D.C., writing and implementing laws including the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts, the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, and Safe Drinking Water Act. Perhaps he was onto something. Even though you can't solve the whole problem, you do what you can. Action builds hope.

Left: A volunteer carries plastic trash from Griswold Point in Old Lyme during a March clean-up that involved Ebbin and members of the UConn EcoHusky Club working along with the Nature Conservancy's Connecticut chapter. Photo: Judy Benson



Ebbin shows the haul of trash she, her husband and son collected on Earth Day April 22 along Thomas Road in Groton, including the shopping cart pulled out of Birch Plain Creek. Photo: Judy Benson

After graduating, I migrated across the continent to Alaska to study fisheries management at the University of Alaska's School of Fisheries in Juneau. Fishing commercially for salmon or halibut during my free time, I fell in love with small boat fisheries and the fishermen engaged in them.

I was lucky to receive a Sea Grant Fellowship to work with the North Pacific Fishery Management Council and was introduced to Alaska's large boat fleet at this time: factory trawlers, joint ventures and motherships. It was at the end of the 10-year phase-out of foreign fishing mandated in the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. This, I realized much later, was an historic and significant moment, and U.S. fishermen were ramping up to fill the impending void.

Then I headed south to Washington state. There I worked with the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission (a natural resource management support organization comprised of 20 treaty tribes in the Puget Sound and Washington coastal area) and Makah and Squaxin Island tribes. I became immersed in the world of state-tribal fisheries co-management. It was another historic moment in the world of fisheries management, as the fractious past of litigation, confrontation and violence in the Pacific Northwest gave way to a working relationship focused on common goals. And here I realized a critical insight: fisheries managers do not manage fish, they manage people.

And so, like a salmon homing in on its natal stream, I returned to the Atlantic coast. I entered Yale University's School of

Forestry and Environmental Studies to learn more about the people part of the equation, studying the human dimensions of the environment with Professor Stephen Kellert.

He gave me the opportunity to help organize a workshop that became the basis for a seminal book edited by Kellert and Harvard's E. O. Wilson: *The Biophilia Hypothesis*. The workshop and book explored Wilson's idea that the very essence of our humanity is in fact derived from our association with other living organisms. In other words, humans need nature to be human. And that dependence extends beyond the material and economic to encompass a suite of aesthetic, cultural, intellectual and spiritual meanings.

My research focused on the people, processes and institutions engaged in the co-management of tribal fisheries in Alaska, specifically the Kuskokwim River, and the Puget Sound region of Washington. I found that the present is a function of many threads stretching back in time, and that to understand these different threads requires insights from many disciplines: law, history, anthropology, political science, economics and sociology, in addition to the natural sciences. My efforts were aimed at understanding how institutions can restructure our relationships with resources and the environment, as well as with other people.

Nowadays I work as Connecticut Sea Grant's research coordinator. In addition, I teach environmental science and policy classes at UConn's Avery Point campus and am faculty advisor to the campus environmental club, the EcoHuskies. I teach my students about climate change, how to calculate their environmental footprints, what comprises them and ways to reduce them. We discuss the IPAT framework – an equation that determines environmental impact based on population, affluence and technology. This concept stimulates thinking about the drivers of environmental impact, what's most important, what's missing, and what can we do to reign our impacts in. We talk about the need to attack the drivers, to change behavior, reduce consumption and the type of consumption.

I try to leave my students with more hope than despair, to end

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on trajectories that look forward towards sustainable solutions and futures. We discuss the inherent tradeoffs involved in simply being alive, eating food, using energy, inhabiting a home.

I tell my students that my generation is leaving the world in their hands. They will need to make the decisions regarding how it is used, abused or nurtured. Their task will be to understand and compare the costs involved in their decisions, to take charge and steer a course into the future.

Since joining Sea Grant and UConn, my role in this larger-than-life race to preserve the planet's habitability for future human beings — my three children, my students, my EcoHuskies — has been to educate. All any of us can do is leave this world a little better off. My contribution is to facilitate the critical process of self-awareness, to invite students to reflect on sustainable futures and encourage thoughtful behavior among a few of my fellow travelers perched on this blue marble hurtling through space.

Lately, though, since the coronavirus pandemic, some of my earliest impulses towards nature and the environment have taken on new relevance that I hope to share with my students. Prolonged time in our homes has made it obvious that our built environments can only sustain us for so long.

We are animals, domesticated to an extent, but still in need of wildness on occasion. Throughout the days of confinement, brief but regular escapes from my house showed me that many of my neighbors feel the same. They walked and biked along wooded trails, beaches and empty roads — at least six feet apart, of course — but still rejoicing in being outside.

The need I recognized as a child to be outside, to embrace nature, is universal and essential to all humans. It's a need I can help my students understand, appreciate and nurture and could make the societal changes required to grapple with the hard challenges of climate change and building a sustainable future a bit easier to bear.

A quote from the poet Maya Angelou guides my outlook: *"Hope and fear cannot occupy the same space. Invite one to stay."*